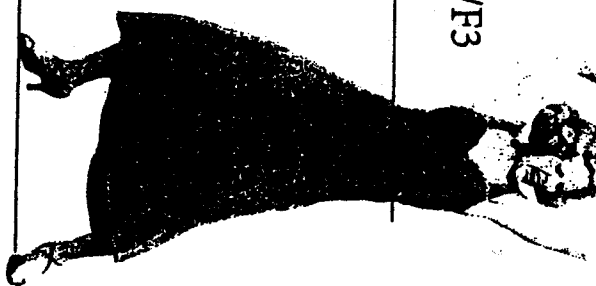


THEATER: "Gypsy," with
Susannah Mars, right, trumpets the opening of theater season/F3

The Sunday Oregonian

Arts Week



SUNDAY • SEPTEMBER 30, 2001

Hurricane 'Gypsy' unleashes a force of nature

By BOB HICKS
THE OREGONIAN

Portland's small theaters have opened a dozen shows in the past couple of weeks, a few quite good. But with Friday night's opening of the big brass musical "Gypsy" at Portland Center Stage, this most tentative of theatrical seasons seems emphatically to have begun.

It is tentative, of course, because few people are quite sure how to approach entertainment in a time of crisis. Broadway houses have been hit hard, both because of a shortage of tourists and because of the natural depression that has settled over New Yorkers.

In cities such as Portland that are far from the physical damage, the immediate effect is less severe. But the questions remain. Should I be spending my time on something more essential? If I am merely entertained, should I feel guilty? Is it OK to laugh?

REVIEW/Theater

Gypsy

Company: Portland Center Stage
Where: Newmark Theatre, Portland Center for the Performing Arts, 515 S.W. Broadway
Cast: Pamela Tuessley, Yoshiko, 8 p.m. Thursday; 7 and 7 p.m. Saturday through Oct. 21
Tickets: \$18-\$44, 503-274-6589

In "Gypsy," the 1959 backstage musical, in which Ethel Merman gave the most celebrated performance of her career as the coarse and domineering stage mother Rose, echoes of how come tripping from the stage. The flag-waving and rife-twitting of Momma Rose's ratty group of child per-

formers — continued, one imagines, because Rose figured it'd sell well to the hayseeds but also because a woman like Rose was likely to be genuinely pathetic — has a disproportionate impact. In Rose's single-minded ferocity (if she'd been an artist herself she might have been like Madonna, not good but relentless) one feels hints of the zealotry that can allow a person to kill one's self for a cause. Even in Louise's slow, cautious rise to her liberated future as the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee, one can find parallels to America's so-far-measured response to terrorist attack: Think before you act. These things are not what the show "means." But they are thoughts that can't help but intrude.

"Gypsy," with its America-as-theater backstage fable by Arthur Laurents and its superb pairing of Stephen Sondheim's lyrics and Julie Styne's songs, is one of the oldest of the great musicals: sketchy, episodic, not quite a comedy, not quite a tragedy, with a main character who isn't the title character. Yet after more than 40 years it holds up remarkably well, and in most ways Center Stage's same, lively and gorgeously sung production hits it smack-on.

Director Bill Fennelly's show is crisy and energetic from its well-scrubbed child actors (Lauren Hillson is the beamy, high-slicking Baby Jane) to his shabby-grand costumes (by Paul Tazewell). It has the seductive sizzle of Danny Verono's breakout song-and-dance "All I Need Is the Girl," and the sympathetic solidity of Michael Pemberton, who looks like a down-at-the-heels Daddy Warbucks, as the soft-hearted vaudeville agent Hebbie. Most of all, it has a knockout of a Momma Rose in Susannah Mars, and an utterly winning Ugly Duckling of a Louise

In Kate Shindle, the poised and funny actress who was Miss America in 1936, it doesn't plumb the play's essential soft side: It has not just nerves, but bones and sinews of steel. Yet as show centerpiece, Center Stage's "Gypsy" is a great big kick in the pants.

Friends who saw Merman play Momma Rose assure me her performance was electric and unforgettable. I never saw Merman on stage; I know her only through recordings, and that piercing nasal trumpet of a voice makes me change. I would rather listen to Susannah Mars sing any day of the week, and in "Gypsy," Mars pulls out all the stops, investing the lines of "Everything's Coming Up Roses" and the triumphant "Rose's Turn" with chills and thrills. The effect is simple: Wonderfully, she commands the stage.